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Founder's Day Convocation

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At Illinois Wesleyan University we sponsor our summer reading program to provide students, faculty, and staff with a shared intellectual experience and to provide each incoming class the opportunity to engage collectively in self-reflection and critical discourse. It is an entry into the process of thoughtful analysis that is the core of liberal learning.

Each year, we select a book that is engaging, provocative, and a model of the complex challenges we encounter in the modern world. How can these examples challenge each of us to make courageous choices that become the difference we wish to see in the world?

Luma Mufleh first encountered the students who would become the Fugees through a wrong turn, and as Robert Frost wrote, “that has made all the difference.”¹ Will you know when a wrong turn has brought you to your destiny, or will you reject the “road less travelled” for the comfort of the known? How will you know?

Would you be willing to risk everything to help a stranger, or even a friend? Will you be the defenders of justice for those whose voices cannot be heard? Will you have the courage to make a difference?

In his Letter from Birmingham Jail, Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote “One day the South will recognize its real heroes. They will be the James Merediths, with the noble sense of purpose that enables them to face jeering and hostile mobs, and with the agonizing loneliness that characterizes the life of the pioneer. They will be old, oppressed, battered Negro women, symbolized in a seventy two year old woman in Montgomery, Alabama, who rose up with a sense of dignity and with her people decided not to ride segregated buses... They will be the young high school and college students, the young ministers of the gospel and a host of their elders, courageously and nonviolently sitting in at lunch counters and willingly going to jail for conscience's sake. One day the South will know that when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters, they were in reality standing up for what is best in the American dream and for the most sacred values in our Judeo Christian heritage, thereby bringing our nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in their formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.”²

The incoming waves of refugees are the South’s newest disenfranchised people. They are our nation’s newest disenfranchised people, and it is through the examples of a new generation of heroes like today’s speaker that we can bring our nation, a nation of refugees, back again to those great wells of democracy and to make manifest for them the best of the American dream.

¹ Robert Frost: “The Road not Taken: from *Mountain Interval* (1920).

² Martin Luther King, Jr.: *Letter from Birmingham Jail* (1963).